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ABSTRACT

This project investigated the use of external examiners by institutions accredited by the Open University Validation Services (OUVS) in England. The investigation involved visiting 18 accredited institutions and interviewing 10 external examiners. The study found widespread approval of the contribution made by external examiners. Reasons given for the support included: emphasis on justice and standards, comparability, validity, consistency, guarantee of quality to students, externality, advice, reassurance, "protection against ourselves," staff development, and the examiner's role as "critical friend." Concerns included institutional expectations, the workload of external examiners, recruitment of external examiners, remuneration, standards, and reports. Other issues discussed in the use of external examiners include documentation of their duties, training, the examiners' role and period of tenure, examiners' meeting with students, and fees. Issues involved with credit-rated institutions are also noted. Eighteen recommendations are offered. An appendix contains a list of visits made. Other Quality Support Center publications are listed. (JDD)

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USING EXTERNAL EXAMINERS

A report to Open University Validation Services, its accredited and credit-rated institutions

by
Harold Silver and
Ruth Williams

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USING EXTERNAL EXAMINERS

A report to Open University Validation Services, its accredited and credit-rated institutions

Harold Silver
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Report of a project commissioned by OUVS and conducted by the Open University's Quality Support Centre, 1993-94

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Preface

This project was undertaken by the Open University's Quality Support Centre at the request of the Open University Validation Services (OUVS). It was to be an investigation of the use of external examiners by the institutions accredited by the OUVS, and it was agreed to visit a proportion of these to discuss the processes and experience with those responsible for all phases of their relationships with external examiners. It was also agreed to visit a sample of external examiners. Perspectives would also be obtained from some institutions credit-rated by OUVS.

In conducting this study we have had nothing but supportive welcomes and co-operation from all concerned, and to all those who devoted time to discussing these issues with us we express our warmest thanks.

When we were planning this project we were also engaged in planning a study of the external examiner system and its future in higher education generally, a project also to be carried out by the Quality Support Centre and commissioned by the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC). The intention was for the two projects to run in parallel, but the latter project took longer to launch. Lessons from the present study and from continuing dialogue with OUVS-related institutions will, however, be made available to the HEQC-sponsored project, in which we both play a part.

We hope that our discussion of external examining, the issues involved and the perspectives offered by these institutions and individuals, their needs and aspirations, reflects the experience we have explored in conducting this study. We also hope that it will be of help in developing the relationships between OUVS and the institutions and their external examiners, in the interest of their programmes and their students.

Harold Silver
Ruth Williams

August 1994

Notes

1 All comments recorded in the text in quotation marks are verbatim quotations from members of the institutions visited, or from the external examiners interviewed.

2 There is some difficulty in using the term 'institutions' for all the bodies accredited and credit-rated by OUVS. Some of these are industry-based or professional bodies which have a validated or credit-rated course or courses. Some may also be national bodies or company-based educational units. For the sake of brevity and consistency, however, we have applied the term 'institutions' to all the bodies that have a relationship with OUVS.

3 **Definitions, as used by Open University Validation Services**

Accreditation

Accreditation is the process through which an institution is judged by a group of external peers to provide a satisfactory environment for the conduct of courses leading to OU validated awards.

Credit-rating

Credit-rating is the process through which any learning programme is compared with existing higher education awards and credit points allocated in accordance with the nationally recognised principles of the Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme (CATS).

Validation

Validation is the process whereby a judgement is reached by a group including external peers as to whether a course designed to lead to an OU validated award meets the requirements for that award.

USING EXTERNAL EXAMINERS

A report to Open University Validation Services, its accredited and credit-rated institutions

1 The project

1.1 Since 1991 the Open University Validation Services (OUVS) has been the mechanism adopted by the Open University (OU) for validating awards and sharing in the promotion of quality assurance with its accredited institutions. OUVS is also indirectly involved in quality assurance through the institutions whose programmes are credit-rated. In common with other institutions of higher education accredited institutions appoint external examiners for their undergraduate and postgraduate courses, either with nominations approved by the OUVS, or through authority delegated to their academic boards.

1.2 OUVS provides a regulatory, procedural and monitoring framework within which the institutions operate. It defines the purpose of external examining as 'to ensure that justice is done to the individual student and that the standard of the University's validated awards is maintained' (OUVS, *Handbook for Validated Awards*, 1993, E3.1). The regulations set out the rights and responsibilities of external examiners, procedures and criteria for their appointment, their relationship to validation and review, and requirements relating to their reports. OUVS officers provide liaison with the institutions and are responsible for the OUVS role in these procedures.

1.3 The purpose of the present project was to investigate the use of external examiners by these institutions and to report to OUVS and its associated institutions. The Quality Support Centre (QSC) of the Open University was invited to conduct the investigation and did so between August 1993 and August 1994. The study was carried out by Harold Silver, Visiting Research Professor at the OU, attached to QSC, and Ruth Williams, Quality Support Officer in QSC. This report has been submitted for comment and correction to the institutions visited and to OUVS, but the final responsibility for the report rests with the two authors. Although a list of visits made is contained in the Appendix neither institutions nor individuals are identified in the text. Minor references to specific credit-rated institutions are contained in section 5.

1.4 Part of the background to this study lies in work on external examining conducted under the auspices of the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) before it was dissolved in 1993. Conferences, seminars and other work on modularisation, for example, resulted in the publication of *Going Modular* and *The Modular Option* in 1989 and 1990 respectively, with obvious implications for the functions of external examiners. In 1992 a report of a seminar was published under the title of *The External Examiner and Curriculum Change*, and Harold Silver was commissioned to study the changing patterns of external examiner activity in CNAA-related institutions. The findings of this in-depth study of what were then two polytechnics and one college of higher education were published in 1993 as *External Examiners: changing roles?* Prior to these discussions and studies the most comprehensive work on external examining had been carried out in the mid-1980s by a team led by David Warren Piper, whose report was entitled *The Role of External Examiners for Undergraduate Courses in the United Kingdom* (1989). The work was financed by the CNAA and the Department of Education and Science (DES) and was carried out under the auspices of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), which published a summary version of the report entitled *The Role of External Examiners* (1989).

1.5 The Warren Piper investigation was based on data collected mainly in 1986, and since that date much has changed in higher education. For example, many more institutions have developed modular programmes, methods of student assessment have in many cases changed radically, and student numbers have dramatically increased. The Open University has taken over a validating role from the CNAA, though not all of these and other changes have affected its associated institutions. The background of change, however, was one factor influencing the OUVS to launch this study. An important second factor was the rapidly changing picture in OUVS accreditation and credit-rating. The institutions were extremely diverse. Some of them had experience of working with the CNAA or universities, and were now expanding and having new courses approved. Others, many of them relatively small, had only recently entered the landscape of higher education accreditation. OUVS was accrediting more than 25 institutions, the number changing as some gained degree awarding powers and others successfully negotiated accreditation agreements. A third factor was the increasing national attention being given to external examiners, expectations of their contribution to standards in higher education, and difficulties relating to their recruitment and roles.

1.6 This project was intended to run in parallel with a project on the future of external examining in higher education generally, conducted by QSC and commissioned by the HEQC. The launch of the HEQC-sponsored project was delayed, and the report on that project will not appear until the early part of 1995. That project will have available to it, however, the relevant findings of this study and the outcome of any further interaction with the institutions.

1.7 The OUVS project was based on visits, on documentation made available by the places visited, and on external examiners' reports. Eighteen accredited institutions were visited, and detailed discussions were held with ten external

examiners. Some of the places visited had many years of experience of using external examiners (as well as BTEC moderators), others had appointed external examiners too recently for them to have seen a cohort of students through to their award. Some institutions had several thousand students, some several hundred, and a small number had under a hundred. Some had all their work validated by OUVS, some also had courses validated by other universities. Some had a wide variety of courses in different fields, some were focused on a single programme area. The pattern of full- and part-time provision varied considerably. Some institutions had undergraduate courses only, some had masters or other postgraduate courses only, some had a mix of the two. Some courses were run by industrially-based centres or professional bodies, others by academic institutions with strong professionally-oriented programmes. Some were private and others were public institutions. Some had strong outside affiliations (for example, the theological colleges) and some combined further and higher education provision. Courses in some institutions were partly or wholly based on distance learning. The positions of the people with whom discussions took place varied on different visits. In some cases these included senior management, registrars, faculty deans and course leaders and team members. Discussions were with those most directly concerned with the procedures concerning external examining, or with the external examiners themselves.

1.8 The project had an interest in the views of the institutions that were credit-rated by OUVS. It also had an interest in the position of those OUVS-accredited institutions which were at the same time accredited for professional purposes by other bodies. The perspectives and experiences of these institutions are reflected in this report in section 5.

2 Strengths of the system

2.1 Given the difficulties and doubts widely expressed nationally about the effectiveness and viability of the external examiner system it is important to underline that at no point in this project was any reservation expressed about the importance, now and in the future, of the system. Quite the reverse. There was widespread approval of the contribution made by external examiners, and an adamant concern that the system should continue. Many of the institutions were aware of the difficulties that they had encountered or that lay ahead as a result of modularisation, credit transfer, increased student numbers, and other changes in their own institutions or in the system generally. Nevertheless, they considered that such difficulties, however real, would not invalidate the continued roles and value of external examiners. It is worth outlining the main reasons given for this unanimous support for the external examiner system.

2.1.1 *Frequent emphasis on 'justice, standards and comparability'*, echoing the purposes as defined by the OUVS, and before it by the CNAA, by the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals, and individual institutions. This combination of emphases was often related to the external examiners' role in quality assurance.

2.1.2 *Comparability* - important for all institutions, but for small institutions and minority subjects in particular. Comparison of standards with larger, established universities and courses is seen as essential. The external examiner, in making favourable comparisons, 'legitimates our standards'. External examiners comment on standards being 'comparable to similar degrees elsewhere' and make judgements about 'course comparability', the standard of courses often being comparable with that 'in my own university' and in others 'where I have been an external examiner'. A BSc in a small institution 'is described as equivalent to ones in university departments'.

2.1.3 *Validity*, as a result of such comparisons. The external examiner's underwriting of comparable standards is important 'as an important selling point in competition with the universities', or 'to ensure standing in Europe', or 'to operate on the world stage' (in the last example notably in relation to the Third World, on the basis of the 'British model of guaranteed standards'). Inexperienced, small or monotechnic institutions feel that external examiners help to bring them into the mainstream of higher education.

2.1.4 *Consistency*, ensuring, for example, 'comparability amongst our own students', or 'consistency inside and outwith the College'. One college principal emphasised the combination of the 'external dimension and internal consistency'; in one professional field staff affirmed the important role of the external examiner in securing 'consistency of practice'; and in another professional field the external examiner emphasised 'consistency between candidates and across elements of the programme'.

2.1.5 *The student view*, notably but not exclusively in small institutions. This is a question of validating the award in the eyes of students, who 'want to be sure of having acceptable awards', or a guarantee of the award as a result of external examining, 'and students would wish to keep it'. As one external examiner put it: 'Students do worry about comparability, that is, whether the degree they get from one institution is as "good" as that from another one'.

2.1.6 *Externality*, emphasising the external examiner as a form of 'external audit', the value of 'external peer review', the 'external dimension paramount for the success of the certificate', an 'objective view of the course', strong support for 'the outside view'. In the words of an external examiner from one profession - 'some external view of standards is essential', or of one from another profession - 'if there were no external examiners the professional body itself would have to monitor standards'.

2.1.7 *Advice*, seen unfailingly as a strength of the system. External examiners are viewed as sources of insight ('they question what colleges take for granted'), of help to new courses and immature institutions, and of improvement for all the processes involved in the delivery of courses, the assessment of students, and the conduct of examination boards. For one relatively new course the 'main role' of the external examiner was 'to be consulted', for another the advice was invaluable in shaping the operation of the examination board. Particularly when willing to visit during the year, external examiners were valued for their participation in discussions of all aspects of course policy and practice, bringing their 'experience elsewhere'.

2.1.8 *Reassurance*, about standards, that 'we are playing the game the right way'. This again has importance for small institutions without a large reservoir of internal staff experience on which to draw, but in general for staff who feel they benefit from the inputs and stimulus provided by external examiners at boards or at other times.

2.1.9 *'Protection against ourselves'* - a description offered at one medium-sized institution, but widely echoed. External examining, continued this senior member of academic staff, brings in people who have 'sensible differences from us', who ensure regular contact with 'other value systems'. At a smaller institution the comment was that external examiners 'break down a certain tendency to secrecy by small institutions.... It is too easy to be insular'. Isolated courses might otherwise be 'cut off'.

2.1.10 *Staff development*, for the course and for the external examiner. 'We learn more about education' was an institutional view, and 'it helps me to understand other kinds of students' was the view of an external examiner. This aspect of the system came through most strongly where external examiners were involved in more than the examination board, attended briefing days or meetings specially arranged to discuss issues raised by them, or simply to sample the culture of the course and the institution.

2.1.11 *'Critical friends'* - a common description. External examiners were perceived as acting sympathetically but professionally, responsive to the needs of the institution. They came to know the work of the institution much better 'than do Funding Council assessors'.

3 Some concerns

3.1 *Institutional expectations.* A frequent criticism from institutions had to do with the unwillingness of external examiners, for a variety of reasons, to attend at times other than for the examination board. In some cases they were unwilling to accept invitations to visit at other times, including for briefing purposes after being appointed, and a small number turned out to be too busy to contribute as hoped by the course team. There were occasional references to the failure of external examiners to offer helpful advice, particularly in the area of student assessment. One institution rapidly replaced its initially appointed external examiners, with whom they had a poor experience, and another institution terminated the appointment of one who failed to turn up to the board. Some institutions, on the other hand, provided no induction for their newly appointed examiners, relying on the course and institutional documentation.

3.2 *Workload.* The commitment was seen by most external examiners as substantial, most commonly equivalent to roughly a week's work. Attendance twice a year for semester boards was becoming common, attendance at first semester boards not always being required (and in one case the institution made it clear it did not wish the external examiner to attend for the first semester board). In the case of diploma or masters courses for which students could register at different times, attendance could be frequent for board meetings or for other purposes (four times a year in two cases). Professional courses might be particularly demanding (in one case at least three days in February and two days in July, in addition to handling the course work and scripts). One external examiner travelled a considerable distance to a college three times a year, to a total of ten days. External examining was frequently viewed as 'a demanding task', involving a considerable workload when combined with the pressures of the external examiner's own academic institution or professional employment. This was sometimes described as a 'tension' between the two sets of demands.

3.3 *Recruitment.* Although recruitment of external examiners was by no means a widespread concern, in some cases it was. There were mixed views about the ease with which external examiners could be recruited from the professions, in one case the problem was raised of recruiting external examiners from other institutions which were 'rivals or competitors' in the market place, and in another recruiting an external examiner might mean the loss of a student placement in that institution. In some subject areas there was a real difficulty as a result of the 'limited reservoir' of people available: they were 'not reluctant, just under pressure'. A list of people available held by a professional body might be 'restrictive', and where a professional was required as part of an external examiner team this could mean drawing someone from 'an incestuous little group'.

3.4 *Remuneration.* This was raised as a concern in a small number of cases. Views were mixed about the possibility and desirability of establishing

'professional levels of payment'. One view from a postgraduate course was that 'we don't want people who do it for the money', and an external examiner at another institution emphasised that 'we don't do it for the money'. There were, however, expressions of concern that the poor levels of remuneration might deter some potential external examiners.

3.5 *External examiners not from academic institutions.* A problem associated with such external examiners if holding only one examinership was their inability to make judgements based on comparisons. External examiners from industry or the professions also sometimes felt uncertain or diffident about their role. Their role was not always clearly defined or understood by the staff, and both kinds of uncertainty might surface particularly if the external examiners also reported to a professional body. Although some professional bodies provide a form of training, it did not appear that this was substantial enough to ease the problem.

3.6 *Advisory role.* Although the advisory role of external examiners was appreciated, in some instances it was felt that this role had been taken too far. In new courses and in institutions embarking on higher education programmes for the first time, external examiners could be tempted to try to dictate policy or to take 'too strong a line'.

3.7 *Administration.* External examiners sometimes complained of administrative weaknesses, notably the late arrival of scripts, presenting 'unreasonable deadlines'. It was not always clear that administrators adequately consulted external examiners, for example, over the principle on which student work was to be sampled. External examiners sometimes expressed uncertainty about other matters, for example how marks were aggregated between first and second semester boards. Administrators did not always realise that information and consultation were essential if external examiners were to carry out their functions properly.

3.8 *Quality assurance procedures.* It was clear that some, perhaps recently accredited, institutions were not fully aware of the commitments in their accreditation agreement or the procedural requirements of the OUVS, having, for example, no appropriate procedure for nominating and proposing external examiners. This and other difficulties could be particularly obvious in smaller institutions where the same people appeared as course teams, administrators and committee members. The quality procedures themselves might therefore be sometimes limited or weak, with the role of external examiners in relation to such procedures somewhat uncertain.

3.9 *Feedback.* Feedback to external examiners, following suggestions or critical comments they make at an examination board or in a written report, was sometimes sporadic or non-existent. One institution claimed always to report back to the external examiners, but one of the latter claimed never to have had such feedback. The result in some cases was that external examiners returned the following year with their criticism or recommendation not dealt with, or their request not met. In the majority of such cases, however, institutions

seem to have followed through the external examiners' comments without reporting back to them on action taken.

3.10 *Second marking.* The issue of external examiners acting as 'second markers' has been resolved in most, but not all institutions. In one institution an external examiner was seeking reassurance that all scripts were being doubled marked internally as this was something he was not prepared to undertake; in another there appeared to be no double marking in the college and the external examiner was being used as second marker; in a third, small institution the external examiner was second marking 'at the margins'. This is an area for which there is no OUVS regulation, and on which there is some variation of practice in higher education. Internal double marking, however, is commonly seen as a requirement.

3.11 *Standards.* A small number of problems surfaced, both in discussion and in external examiners' reports, regarding the standards being set and the role of the external examiner in relation to them. Even where an external examiner could commend a course as comparable in standard to ones elsewhere, it was possible also to express concern about marking scales and different marking standards applied by different internal examiners. A different examiner for the same course could comment that weak students were being allowed to pass, and ask the course team to consider if they were really grading 'at honours level'. An external examiner at another institution was so convinced that too many students were ending up with firsts or upper seconds that on the spot he drafted a set of criteria on degree classification for discussion by the course team. Examples of this kind were few. Also few were the expressions of loss of power and influence that is an issue in higher education more generally, though one examiner felt under pressure to ratify doubtful decisions, and another thought that external examiners were losing their traditional 'individual discretion'. These concerns must be seen, however, in the context of general approval of the standards and procedures of the accredited institutions.

3.12 *Non-academic institutions.* Leaders of courses being run by non-academic (industrial or professional) institutions tended to see themselves as somewhat isolated, in need of more than just contact with external examiners. These were units with limited experience of committee and other practices common in higher education, perhaps lacking in internal resources for consultation and policy making and implementation.

3.13 *Reports.* A final area of concern is that of external examiners' reports. The majority of institutions had good machinery for receiving and responding to reports, many of which were full and helpful, and were seen as such by the institutions. There were, however, instances of the institution's own prescribed procedures not being followed, or reports failing to arrive on time or at all. OUVS lays down clearly that 'external examiners are required to report annually to the Academic Board on the conduct of the assessments just concluded and on issues relating to assessment' (*Handbook*, E3.4). One institution, however, did not require such a report and instead minuted a verbal report at the board. At a second institution the external examiner wrote

the report before the board meeting and brought it with him, and at a third the external examiner wrote a letter before the board, and on the day of the board added a kind of aide-memoire. In most cases where there is more than one external examiner they write separate reports, but in a small number of cases they produced joint reports. Also in a minority of cases reports tended to be perfunctory rituals, including at those institutions where the structure of proformas for completion was ill thought out and encouraged brevity and generality, and were sometimes seen as 'unhelpful'.

4 Questions

4.1 *What documentation?*

College A has a comprehensive document on *Guidelines and Procedures for External Examiners*, College B does not yet have a formal statement of the external examiners' duties. College C has a recent document on *External Examiners: role, appointment, rights and responsibilities*, College D has *Notes of Guidance* for external examiners, College E has a 1994 *Guide for External Examiners*. Some have indications of external examiners' roles in course documents, but many of these, passing on the messages of the OUVS, have nothing specific to the institution. External examiners have in some cases not read the documentation they received. How much documentation, and of what kind, is necessary and appropriate?

4.2 *Induction or training?*

One institution has a training day for its external examiners, another is associated with a professional body which has a register of people available as external examiners, who receive four days of training, and spend their first year on the register as observers. One institution paid for all its external examiners to attend workshops arranged by the Open University's Quality Support Centre. Although the question of training opportunities arises, the question of induction by institutions themselves emerges as a more important issue. Although the briefing of newly appointed external examiners is an important issue in higher education generally, practice is variable. The OUVS guidelines lay down that they must be briefed 'on their task as soon as possible after appointment, preferably by visiting the institution to meet staff and students' (*Handbook*, E3.2.9). This requirement is obviously of particular importance in the case of external examiners not from academic institutions, and it also raises issues about local and national responsibilities in the briefing process. Not all the institutions visited do in fact extend such an invitation, and even if they do, not all external examiners accept the invitation. Some professionally or industrially based courses, for example, invite prospective external examiners before nominating them, to make sure they are willing to work in the particular context, to 'see if they fit'. Post-appointment induction sessions bring external examiners together with staff, and in some cases with students. Where someone inexperienced is the sole external examiner one institution pairs this person with a 'mentor', an experienced examiner on another course. The more experienced and senior external examiners may see briefing arrangements as time-consuming and unnecessary.

4.3 *Training for staff of accredited institutions?*

Questions of training for the staff of the institutions themselves took two forms. First, there was a realisation that some staff, particularly when newly appointed to the leadership of a course, need help with understanding the role of the external examiner and the necessary relationship. This was not always

easy to provide within the institution. Secondly, some accredited institutions would wish to have external examiners from other accredited institutions, and would also wish to help their own staff to become external examiners elsewhere. These questions therefore raise wider issues of possible national support for the training of course leaders and of prospective external examiners among the staff of accredited institutions.

4.4 *Other visits?*

The practice of visits to the institution by external examiners at times other than for board meetings is even more variable. The most common practice is for external examiners to arrive in time for a pre-board meeting, on the morning of the board or the previous day. In the latter case the time may also be used to sample students' work - either because this is the institution's preference or because the external examiners request the arrangement rather than having work sent to them in advance. In a small number of cases only do the external examiners meet on their own, more commonly they meet with the course leader or course team to discuss the year's work or to sort out difficult problems, or both. Some, particularly the larger institutions, invite new external examiners to shadow a finishing examiner and attend a board meeting before formally taking up the appointment. One institution engaged in a distance learning programme involves the external examiners in workshops for tutors, for example, on home study support. The question of visits is essentially about the nature of the relationship and the respective views of the external examiner and the institution as to the functions to be performed. How close is it desirable for the relationship to be? Is the external examiner part of a team (with other external and/or internal examiners) which requires some direct involvement before the board and at other times of the year? Is the role of the external examiner wider than that of monitoring standards and student classification at the board itself? We return to these questions below.

4.5 *How long?*

The period of tenure did not emerge as a serious issue, but practice does vary. Four calendar years is seen by OUVS as the most likely norm, though three years is not uncommon. The more difficult it is to locate suitable external examiners, particularly in small fields, the greater the pressure to extend the period. OUVS also lays down that an external examiner should not be replaced 'by an individual from the same institution' (*Handbook*, E3.3.4c), a regulation which can create difficulties in some subject areas.

4.6 *How close?*

There was no doubting the emphasis placed by a majority of institutions on the advisory role they wished external examiners to play: in the words of one principal 'dialogue, not just assessment and the examination board.... helping the course and the college to develop'. We have seen that this advisory role, this sharing of other experience, is appreciated, especially but not only when an institution or a course is finding its feet. Not that an advisory or

consultancy relationship is without problems. One director of studies warned that too close an advisory role would alter relationships: 'A difficult area for the external examiner and the staff is getting a right balance in which each recognises the expertise of the other, but in such a way that neither is seen attempting to use that expertise in an overbearing way'. This is not necessarily the outcome, but the danger is present. Too close a relationship may also have the danger not just of understanding the particular culture, but becoming part of it uncritically - though this was not the case in those institutions where external examiners were in fact working closely with the course team. Setting out the terms of the 'dialogue', seeing the external examiners as a team, ensuring respect for the procedures laid down, made it possible to have an interactive relationship without damaging the independent judgement required of the external examiner.

4.7 *Meeting students?*

Whether or not external examiners should meet students appeared as a controversial or at least a confused issue. The viva was generally seen as acceptable, though rarely practised (in one institution external examiners complained that a request for them to viva students on a professional course had not been implemented). A small number of external examiners regularly saw students either during the year or on the morning before the examination board. The board for one diploma programme which has groups of students from industry has arranged to meet on the site of different firms in order that the external examiners can easily meet the candidates, and it is not unusual on postgraduate courses for external examiners to meet informally with groups of students - though this is often impossible when the students are part-time and geographically scattered. In a small number of places the functions of the external examiner system are clearly explained to students, sometimes as part of the student induction programme. Students on one course not only meet their external examiners but have an opportunity to report back on their judgements of the external examiners. It is therefore widely accepted that meetings with students individually or in groups can take place. There are, however, many places where this either does not take place, or is seen as inadvisable. One college wished that external examiners would meet students, but the examiners came only for the board and allowed no time for this to happen. Another college simply could not arrange it because of the particular schedule of their students. A third thought that the initiative should come from the external examiners, who did not take it. A meeting with students planned for an external examiners' induction day did not take place because the staff forgot to invite the students. A request by external examiners to meet students on a professional course at another institution was resisted on the grounds that it appeared 'inspectorial'. One group of staff thought that meetings with students were becoming more difficult because of the modular structure. There was some expression of uncertainty about whether it was right for meetings with students to take place. Given the diversity of practice and principle further debate and recommendations at a national level may be helpful.

4.8 *The importance of reports?*

While most institutions and external examiners took the reporting process seriously, the brevity of some reports and uncertainty about procedures in some cases meant that there were differences of perception. The nature of the proforma, as we have seen, dictates the response in some cases, and care has to be taken that the structure does not inhibit genuine reflection and comment. The timing of the report, to follow the final assessments, was not seen as important everywhere, though some institutions were following the CVCP guidelines on withholding payments to external examiners until the report had been received. Some report forms outlined the kind of content the institution wished to receive, and although such outlines were contained in some of the guidance handbooks for external examiners, it was also clear that some of them had not read the handbooks. The main questions relating to reports, however, concerned the uses to which they were put in the institution. The great majority of institutions saw the reports as part of their regular course monitoring and were responsive to the reports (though, as we have seen, did not always inform external examiners about action taken, or reasons for not taking action). There were examples of institutions setting up special committees to consider measures to be taken, and meetings with external examiners to pursue issues raised. Some institutions had clear procedures for internal reporting on and monitoring of the external examiners' reports and responses by the relevant committees. In many instances it was not regular procedure for newly appointed external examiners to see their predecessors' reports, or for external examiners generally to see the reports of their fellow examiners.

4.9 *How much?*

No complaints were made about the cost of external examining to the institutions. A total bill of direct costs (fees and expenses) of less than £20,000 for a college with 1,350 students on a wide variety of undergraduate and postgraduate degree courses and diplomas and research, served by thirteen external examiners each attending for four days, was not seen as an unreasonable amount. The total bill for institutions with very small numbers of external examiners seemed a modest amount to pay for the benefits they saw in the system. The college cited above paid its external examiners a fee of £400 plus a supplement of £10 for each student over a total of twenty. Most other institutions paid between £250 and £400 on a flat rate, and those with more complicated formulas related to the amount of work probably ended up within that range. Exceptions were largely those which required more substantial attendance and paid according to a formula which took account of the number of days. A private institution might set out deliberately to pay more than was generally paid in public institutions, and another might model its rates on those of a nearby university. The fee, however, masks the level of commitment. £400 might seem very little if the external examiner attends more than once a year and handles a substantial number of course assignments and examination scripts. Where, as in one institution, the number of students was 73 and attendance was for one occasion in the year, £400 would seem

more generous. How much is 'appropriate' as a fee is a question none of the institutions seems to have explored. Having established a level of payment by some form of comparison, raising the level by a percentage for inflation from time to time was all that seemed necessary. External examiners were themselves unable to define a 'professional fee' and could not suggest a figure, even if they agreed with the concept. One, receiving a fee of £250, thought - under pressure of the questioning - that £500 might be reasonable. Broadly speaking, however, the question of remuneration was not salient, and the variations did not seem extreme.

4.10 *The future?*

The level of commitment to the external examiner system has already been underlined. Although the emphasis in general was on the present working of the system there was an awareness of the changes taking place that might need to be taken into account in considering the future of the system. The main issues related to scale, modularisation and diversity in higher education which raised problems, and might increasingly do so, for defining the role of the external examiner.

4.10.1 Increased student numbers alone would not necessarily, it was pointed out, mean an increase in the number of external examiners or more difficult problems. Coping with an increase might go hand in hand with what one person described as the 'validation of internal procedures' - a view which raises questions about the possibly different roles to be played by external examiners at different stages of an institution's maturity. Increased numbers might also mean, as one institution pointed out, that there could be difficulties in turning round a larger sample of student work, and for this institution it raised the question of the geographical location of external examiners, who might need to be more accessible than those currently involved and at some distance.

4.10.2 Increased scale in some, but not all, institutions meant more complex modular programmes. Modularisation might mean the need to tighten up all aspects of procedures, including assessment, the conduct of examination boards, and the appointment and definition of the roles of external examiners. One external examiner on a modular masters degree commented on the satisfactory evolution of the course but thought that 'the value of the move away from very specialised courses to more general but more flexible ones needs to be evaluated. The potential problem is that quality has been sacrificed for quantity'. The wider the spread of modules and student choice, the greater perhaps the 'potential problem'. Nowhere, however, was the problem yet felt to be critical.

4.10.3 Clarifying the role and function of the external examiner was becoming a more urgent issue in some institutions. Retaining the system 'with adjustments' was a not uncommon view, but it was not easy to see how the role might best be adjusted. Comparability and fairness were sometimes seen as problems likely to become more difficult. It is worth referring in this connection to the definition of the current role of external examiners in the handbook produced

by one institution. The role was 'pivotal... in the course quality assurance system in acting as an external point of reference against which standards are measured'. External examiners were therefore required to ensure that assessment and awards were 'fair, impartial and in compliance with the regulations', that the standard of assessment was comparable with that of degree courses elsewhere, that the aims and objectives of modules and courses were being achieved, that 'the quality of educational provision is progressively improved', and that examples of good practice were identified and drawn to the attention of staff. They were also required to 'advise on the appropriateness of assessment methods and standards, module objectives, curriculum content and teaching methods and on the ways in which these may be improved'. Finally, the subject expertise of external examiners was 'less important than their ability to judge both assessments and students in relation to the range of work and skills expected both in the course and in subsequent careers'. Here, as in many institutions of higher education, the traditional emphases on sampling, examining and moderating were not enough. The external examiner is here no longer just the 'safety net' by which one external examiner described his role, but a participant in defining what constitutes an appropriate award, and the elements and conditions which help to shape the award. A simple notion of comparability or equivalence is replaced by a more complex emphasis on advice and judgement. Definitions of the future role of the external examiner in these institutions, whether explicit or not, range from the traditional functions carried out at the examination board and in the reading of scripts, to the matching of the work of the institution against other experience and value systems, and to a substantially revised interpretation of the role and the commitment. If, as seems possible, any institutions move to a 'tiered' system of examination boards, further redefinition of roles will be inevitable, to meet the different requirements of subject-focused and award-focused boards.

4.11 The importance attached to external examining rests on many of the criteria discussed and implied in this report, but there were other reasons adduced. The defence included the need for external objectivity and independence, the lending of credibility and validity, the protection of students and staff in various ways, and by interaction and mutual staff development the strengthening of coherence across the institutions. The status of external examiners was not what it was, suggested staff responsible for one professional course, but 'the role is hellish important'. An external examiner from one of the universities thought that 'if it works well it's a very important part of the higher education system'.

5 Credit-rated institutions and other professional bodies

5.1 It was helpful to have views from the credit-rated institutions both on their own and, in the case of those which accredit courses in other institutions, also on their quality assurance procedures. It was helpful also to discuss the issues with institutions which are accredited by OUVS and at the same time have programmes accredited for professional purposes by other national bodies. This project was not concerned directly with the quality assurance procedures of the credit-rated institutions, or with the work of their professional officers or assessors who oversee standards of professional preparation. In the case of the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW) in particular there is an overlap between the Council's assessors and the external examiners, and it is possible for the same people to occupy both roles. In the case of the Library Association and the National Boards for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting joint validation may take place, either with provider institutions in the former case or with validating higher education institutions in the latter. In these cases, as with other accrediting agencies, there is an interest in the work of external examiners, to the point in some instances (for example in nursing in Scotland) of providing an informal pool from which they may be drawn, or (as in the case of the Church of England for its theological colleges) of approving appointments.

5.2 One relationship between these institutions and external examiners is in connection with the latter's reports. In some cases copies of these go routinely to bodies which provide accreditation for professional purposes (and where professional standards are affected they may follow up reports), and in others accrediting bodies receive them only as part of the supporting documentation for accreditation review events. Where, as in social work, the assessors operate alongside the external examiners (or the same person fills both roles), separate reports go to the professional body and to the institution. There was no doubting the importance attached by these bodies to the external examiners' reports, whether or not these were seen on an annual basis.

5.3 Where there is a close relationship between professional accrediting bodies, providers and other higher education institutions, based on validation and/or assessment, value was clearly attached to activities which could help to clarify the roles of the various partners. Social work, osteopathy, nursing and other professional bodies conduct training sessions for their own assessors or for prospective and present external examiners, or share seminars with validating higher education institutions on their respective roles. Neither the professional bodies nor the staff of the institutions were convinced that the training and induction arrangements were yet adequate. There is a clear assumption in these professional bodies that external examining is a necessary part of the processes which they accredit, but attention to the possible duplication of effort and uncertainty of role remains important.

5.4 The work of the external examiners, as of the professional bodies' own monitoring procedures, was seen to be influenced by moves towards modular

structures and credit accumulation and transfer. The latter was described in one case as leading to a 'credit happy' profession, with staff 'scurrying about after credit'. The difficulties, however, did not diminish the importance of the external examiner role.

5.5 The main problem in some of these contexts was an adequate supply of suitable external examiners, and some credit-rated and accrediting bodies emphasised this problem very strongly. The problem was 'finding enough people to do it'. The number of institutions involved might be small, and finding external examiners who were not former students or members of staff, or were not already doing the permitted maximum of examining, was often difficult. The role of the credit-rated bodies in helping to extend the reservoir of potential external examiners is an issue of importance to all the partners in the exercise.

5.6 The credit-rated and accrediting bodies were not actively concerned with issues concerning external examining, though in reviewing their own procedures they were aware of possible connections. Some were interested in the future of the system from the point of view of their own members who act as external examiners. A view from one credit-rated, professional association was that it might be unwise to consider extending the role of the external examiner too far (into consultancy or reporting on too wide a range of resource or other issues). The professional body's own role 'frees up the external examiners' to focus on the issues with which it was most appropriate for them to be concerned. The senior administrative officer responsible for standards in another institution thought it was essential to keep the external examiner system 'unless there was clear evidence that it was no longer necessary'. A professional officer considered external examining to be 'part of the safeguards for students, practitioners and deliverers.... They are a factor for equity, part of the quality mechanism'. A view from another body was that it was impossible to discuss the abandonment of external examining without asking what would replace it, what would secure the necessary standards. The education director of a fourth body believed that 'there is a very real role for external examiners', in maintaining standards, bringing in experience of a variety of institutions.

6 Some recommendations

Recommendations of various kinds are implied in the questions and concerns outlined above. The following seem to be the most urgent for consideration, and arise directly out of the contacts with institutions and individual external examiners.

Recommendation 1:

> OUVS and the institutions to ensure that the report of this project and the forthcoming report of the project undertaken by the Quality Support Centre for the Higher Education Quality Council are thoroughly debated.

Recommendation 2:

> OUVS to consider which of the issues raised are particularly germane to particular types of institution, and consider how best to pursue these issues with those groupings.

Recommendation 3:

> OUVS to discuss with the institutions the desirability of issuing further guidelines for important procedures, particularly institutional documentation for external examiners, briefing and induction procedures, reports, and meetings with students.

Recommendation 4:

> Institutions to review their induction arrangements for external examiners. OUVS and the institutions to consider a possible requirement for institutions to have an induction meeting, and for prospective external examiners to attend.

Recommendation 5:

> OUVS and the institutions to consult on the desirability of committing external examiners' to make visits for purposes other than attendance at examination boards.

Recommendation 6:

> Institutions to strengthen the concept of external examiners working as a team, especially important for relatively inexperienced external examiners and ones new either to the institution or to the type of institution.

Recommendation 7:

OUVS and the institutions to consult on the range of issues affecting the recruitment of external examiners, including where necessary the training of potential external examiners or those taking up their first appointment.

Recommendation 8:

OUVS and the institutions to consider the specific issues relating to external examiners from professional and industrial backgrounds with little experience of higher education procedures.

Recommendation 9:

Institutions to establish agreed guidelines and principles for course leaders and academic administrators responsible for aspects of assessment and relationships with external examiners, in order to ensure appropriate arrangements with external examiners regarding, for example, the sampling of students' work, timetables and deadlines.

Recommendation 10:

OUVS, small institutions and the staff of courses in industrial and professional settings to consult regularly on the nature, requirements, monitoring and implementation of principles relating to quality assurance.

Recommendation 11:

Institutions, where it is relevant, to monitor adequately the impact of modular structures, credit accumulation and transfer, semesterisation, and other changes.

Recommendation 12:

OUVS and newly accredited institutions to take further steps to ensure that the requirements contained in the OUVS *Handbook for Validated Awards*, other Open University guidelines, and the commitments in accreditation agreements are understood and implemented.

Recommendation 13:

OUVS and the institutions to consider whether the latter would welcome a common approach to the remuneration of external examiners, perhaps most usefully discussed when the HEQC-sponsored project on the future of the external examiner system reports.

Recommendation 14:

OUVS and the institutions, and their current external examiners, after the publication of the HEQC-sponsored report, to consider the nature and implications of possible extensions of the external examiner's advisory or consultancy role, in the context of the institutions' quality assurance procedures.

Recommendation 15:

OUVS to consult and clarify the range of issues concerning external examiners' reports - appropriate proformas and guidelines, the institutions' response to reports, feedback to external examiners, and the provision to external examiners of copies of previous and fellow external examiners' reports.

Recommendation 16

Institutions to ensure that all reports submitted by external examiners and then copied to OUVS are written by external examiners solely in as external examiners to those institutions in the context of OUVS accreditation (not as joint reports with other examiners or assessors, or as reports also for the purposes of other bodies).

Recommendation 17:

OUVS to establish firm guidelines on the question of double marking, and the use of external examiners as 'additional markers'.

Recommendation 18:

OUVS to pursue with credit-rated institutions and bodies responsible for parallel professional accreditation ways of further clarifying respective roles and procedures for all the partners concerned.

Appendix

Accredited institutions visited:

All Nations Christian College, Ware
British School of Osteopathy, London
British Telecom, Milton Keynes
Central School of Speech and Drama, London
European Business School, London
Harper Adams Agricultural College, Newport, Shropshire
Havering College of Further and Higher Education, Hornchurch
Glasgow Bible College
Hillcroft College, Surbiton
Institute of Management, Corby
International Co-operative College, Loughborough
Leo Baeck College, London
National Coaching Foundation, Leeds
New College, Durham
North East Surrey College of Technology, Epsom
Ruskin College, Oxford
St John's College, Nottingham
Selly Oak Colleges, Birmingham

Credit-rated institutions visited:

Capsticks Solicitors, London
Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work, London
Chartered Association of Certified Accountants, London
Institute of Management, Corby
Library Association, London
National Board for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting for Scotland, Edinburgh
United Kingdom Central Council for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting, London

External examiners visited from the following institutions:

Central School of Speech and Drama
European Business School
Harper Adams Agricultural College
Havering College of Further and Higher Education
Hillcroft College
New College, Durham
North East Surrey College of Technology
Ruskin College

External examiners' reports for 1993 were seen from all institutions visited, and those for earlier years in some cases.

Other QSC Publications

Higher Education Digest

A regular compilation of information about recent higher education developments. *Annual subscription (three issues) £16.50, overseas £19.00.*

Higher education is changing rapidly - not only in the UK but all over the world. Reading the *Higher Education Digest* is an effective means of keeping up-to-date and informed about new developments and issues which affect higher education. Since the first issue in 1987, the *Digest* has become one of the most widely read publications by academics, administrators and managers within higher education. It is also of interest to people in other sectors of education, in industry and in government who wish to keep abreast of the latest higher education developments.

Each issue contains over 50 items, ranging from general educational policy to developments within specific disciplines. Items are grouped under general themes such as:

- quality assurance
- teaching, learning and assessment
- curriculum development
- staff development
- policy and funding
- recent statistics
- international developments

It also contains details of forthcoming conferences.

Questions of Quality: in Europe and Beyond, QSC Higher Education Report No. 1, John Brennan and Frans van Vught, October 1993, price £7.50.

This report contains two papers which examine international aspects of quality in higher education from contrasting perspectives.

The first paper entitled 'Higher education quality: a European dimension' is by John Brennan, Head of the Quality Support Centre. It looks at the various 'needs' and 'opportunities' for higher education institutions to be active in Europe and the implications for quality which they raise. It goes on to review the results of recent studies of the comparative quality of educational programmes in several European countries.

The second paper is entitled 'Towards a general model of quality assessment in higher education', by Frans van Vught, Director of the Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies at the Dutch University of Twente. It examines the various systems of quality assessment and assurance which have been developed in North America and Western Europe and, out of them, sets out a general model of quality assessment in higher education.

Managerialism and the Academic Profession: Quality and Control, QSC Higher Education Report No 2, 1994, Professor Martin Trow, price £7.50.

In this report Professor Martin Trow presents a critique of the new arrangements for the external assessment of teaching and research established following the publication of the 1991 White Paper *Higher Education: A New Framework*.

Professor Trow argues that the new arrangements are deeply flawed, that they seriously misunderstand the nature of teaching and learning in higher education, and that they are potentially damaging to the future maintenance and enhancement of quality in British higher education. He cites them as examples of a new form of 'hard managerialism' being introduced into British higher education. The report makes proposals for alternative approaches to the maintenance and enhancement of quality in higher education.

The report also contains a response to Professor Trow's argument by Paul Clark, Director of the Quality Assessment Division at the Higher Education Funding Council for England.

Martin Trow is Professor of Public Policy at the Graduate School of Public Policy, University of California at Berkeley. He has published many books and articles on higher education policy.

Peer Review and the Assessment of Higher Education Quality: An International Perspective, QSC Higher Education Report No. 3, John Brennan, Elaine El-Khawas and Tarla Shah, June 1994, price £7.50.

This report is the result of an international project on the role of peer review in assessing quality in higher education. The project was undertaken jointly by the American Council on Education and the Quality Support Centre of the Open University in the UK.

The rationale for the project derived from the widespread international interest in new forms of public accountability for the activities of higher education institutions. Some of these forms indicate shifts in the balance of power and control between higher education and the state and its agencies. Central to these shifts is the role assigned to peer review, frequently regarded as the traditional mechanism of academic self-regulation. Yet peer review remains a somewhat vague and ill-defined concept.

The project has set out to describe the main variations in the practice of peer review as used by over twenty agencies - primarily in Europe and the United States - which, in different ways, occupy boundaries between higher education and other parts of society, most notably the state and the labour market.

John Brennan and Tarla Shah are Head and Administrator respectively of the Quality Support Centre, Open University, and Elaine El-Khawas is Vice President for Policy Analysis and Research in the American Council on Education.

Quality and Europe: Papers presented at a conference held in London on 29 November 1993, April 1994, Greta Bradley and Brenda Little (Eds), price £7.50.

These papers are from a conference organised by QSC on the theme "Quality and Europe".

Three main issues underlay the conference theme, viz: the mutual recognition of qualifications and periods of study to facilitate student and graduate mobility within Europe; the importance of foreign language competence in breaking down economic and cultural barriers within the Community; and the development of a European dimension in higher education.

The aim of the conference was to explore UK experience of these developments to date, to take stock of difficulties and successes encountered, and to be mindful of ways forward for the future. These issues are dealt with in varying degrees in the papers and, interestingly, with a degree of complementarity between papers.

The overview paper by the editors not only draws on the conference papers, but also on comments received from the floor and from the formal written feedback, in order to highlight those issues which had a resonance throughout the day and which seemed to indicate key pointers for the future.

Contents are: *Quality and Europe* (Timothy Boswell, Minister for Higher Education); *Student Mobility in Europe* (Ulrich Teichler, University of Kassel in Germany); *ERASMUS at Hull University* (Greta Bradley, Hull University); *Intercultural Dimensions in the Management and Development of European Student Mobility Programmes* (David French, Coventry University); *Quality Assurance in University-Wide Language Programmes* (Marianne Howarth, Nottingham Trent University); *The European Commission's Course Credit Transfer System* (Richard Whewell, University of Strathclyde); *Comparative Studies of Higher Education Quality* (John Brennan, Quality Support Centre); *The European Commission's Proposals for Education and Training Programmes for 1995 and Beyond* (Elizabeth Ogden, European Commission's Task Force for Human Resources, Education, Training and Youth).

Students, Courses and Jobs: A Conference Report, July 1994, Ruth Williams (Ed), Code QSC05, price £5.00.

The conference was based on a recent major study, funded by the former Council for National Academic Awards, which explored the experiences and views of graduates up to eight years after leaving college or university. The study examined the relationship between higher education and the labour market, including the success with which different types of courses prepared their students for jobs, and the implications for quality assurance.

Contents are: *The Study - Students, Courses and Jobs* (John Brennan, Quality Support Centre); *The Employer Perspective* (Margaret Murray, Confederation of British Industry); *An Institutional Perspective* (Frank Griffiths, Leeds Metropolitan University); *Collecting the Data* (Phil McGeevor, South Bank University); *Enterprise in Higher Education* (Peter Wright, Higher Education Quality Council); *The Changing Graduate Labour Market* (Gill Court, Institute of Manpower Studies); *The Implications for the Careers Service* (Bob Porrer, University of Edinburgh; *The Circumstances and Aspirations of Mature Students* (Jim Zacune, Staffordshire University); *Reflections on the Day's Discussions* (Maurice Kogan, Brunel University).

Towards a Methodology for Comparative Quality Assessment in European Higher Education, J L Brennan, L C J Goedegebuure, T Shah, D F Westerheijden, P J M Weusthof, 1992, CNAA/QSC/OU, CHEPS, HIS, price £7.00.

This CNAA publication from 1992 has been reprinted by QSC. It examines the possibility of making reliable and valid comparisons of the quality of higher education courses in different European countries. It contains the results of a comparative study of ten economics programmes in England, Germany and The Netherlands which involved an international peer review by leading economists.

A Guide to the Changes in UK Higher Education, 1993, Quality Support Centre, price £3.00.

The Guide contains details of the Higher Education Quality Council, the Quality Assessment Divisions of the English, Scottish and Welsh Higher Education Funding Councils, a Who's Who in Quality, and a complete list of universities and colleges in the United Kingdom. It also contains an article on European Quality Assurance.

Further copies of this publication are available at £5.00 each.

Copies of this and all other QSC publications should be ordered through the Learning Materials Sales Office, The Open University, P O Box 188, Milton Keynes MK7 6DH, tel: 0908 653338, fax: 0908 654320.

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